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“LATIN PROSE” AND MODERN LEARNING

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Two things, surely, poles apart. We are told that of our young people only a small percentage ever reach College; and of these it is quite certain that only a small percentage, unless compelled, ever study “Latin Prose,” by which they mean the writing of that famous tongue. The rest, with audible sighs of relief, thrust off that coil: submit, if necessary, to translating some Latin authors, but fly far from the writing of a Latin word.

Why should they not? For public opinion in this unclassic age is against it, and College opinion reflects public opinion in any College that is not pent within its cloister. “For we must know that, as we are now in an Age of great Philosophers and Men of Reason, so of great quickness and fancy! and that Greek and Latin, which heretofore (though never so impertinently fetched in) was counted admirable, because it had a learned twang; yet, now, such stuff, being out of fashion, is esteemed but very bad company!” So wrote John Eachard in 1670: and so write our educators of to-day. He who dares to think Horace good reading for our College students or the study of Vergil profitable to our seniors in school, must stand back to the wall and deliver his *Apoloogia pro doctrina sua*. What shall be said of him who dares to preach the gospel of Prose Composition? for so, as has been remarked, we still call it, though few—*citra Oceanum*—save Jesuit Fathers, try their hand at verse.

Now I am a College teacher, trained in the straitest classic discipline in vogue a decade of years ago across the sea. And far be it from me to desire to plunge my students into the throes of Latin hexameters or elegiacs, in which I struggled long and fiercely. I would as soon expect students of Shakespeare to produce—ad

unum omnes—sonnets that were sonnets. Nor should I expect training in the writing of Latin Prose to be given indiscriminately; any more than I should expect all my students in College to learn Greek for the sharpening of their intelligence. The training of the specialist is entirely another matter. One of the reasons why so many students dislike Latin is, I believe, that so many teachers of its lower stages do not really know either the literature or the language of Rome. The opportunity is not lacking. In England the best teachers of Latin in schools have taken either Honour Moderations at Oxford, or the First Part, at least, of the Classical Tripos at Cambridge, or an Honours degree at a modern University. So, too, in American Colleges we offer the intensive work of the "major"; we are viewing with great interest a movement toward still greater specialization; we supplement our more elementary instruction by the opportunities of the graduate schools of study in the grammar of research. Yet in spite of these open doors, in these days of hurry and eagerness to rush from goal to goal, our teachers-to-be have often neither time nor patience to equip themselves; and in nothing is this more disastrous than in Latin, which cannot be "crammed up" in a month or a year or two or three. Do we not know the College student who has read no Latin since the Freshman year, and comes on the eve of graduating to ask a recommendation for teaching Latin "because the school is asking it"? The young rush in where the older teachers fear to tread. This is especially true of Latin writing; for of all parts of the study of the classics, nothing is more vital for the future teacher, nothing is also of slower growth, than the knowledge of the internal structure of the language gained by writing its actual words. Not merely for the sake of the "composing"; but for the sake of that intimate knowledge which alone can make the reading of Latin or Greek the pleasure it can, and should be, to any teacher worth his salt.

Another reason is to be found in the antiquated methods of teaching. Sufficient abuse has been heaped, I know, upon the unhappy Grammarian; *absint inani funere neniae*. But, by all means, let us adapt ourselves to modern methods; and, if in teaching of Latin generally, why not in that direst of all its *Dirae*,

Latin "Prose"? How many of us labored conscientiously in school at "constructions"—one, perhaps, each week—faithfully mirrored in sentences the like of which was never seen on land or sea outside the classroom! I open one of the approved text-books, prepared for use in schools by excellent scholars; and I read *passim*: "Are you sorry or glad that your mother-in-law has hanged herself?"; "Let us see how potent the remedies are that are applied by philosophers to diseases of the mind"; "The greatest advantage of old age is that it does not long greatly for pleasure." The sentences are all "frankly translated or adapted from accepted Latin models"; but what about the wretched student compelled to dwell among them? And the intense virtue of these Latin Prose books! "Bradley-Arnold," a book known to classical students throughout the world, simply reeks with blatant piety. "It is vile to consider politics a source of gain"; "Is it possible for a true patriot to refuse to obey the law?"; "I have repeatedly warned your brother not to conceal anything from your excellent father"; etc., etc., *ad nauseam*. Could not some one find time and desire to frame a text-book of "Latin Prose" with as excellent instruction in scholarship as these manuals undoubtedly give, but somewhat more attractive to us moderns?

Again, the very names of these "constructions" are enough to scare the best intentioned pupil. Why "Indirect Discourse"? No one ever talks of "discourse" in ordinary language; why the eternal tag of "cum causal," "ut final" and so on? Why set one's students down in cold blood to master in one fell swoop that array of "conditional clauses"—logical, ideal, real, unreal, present, future, past? Could we not "compose" with them in sentences, and, as soon as possible, in simple passages, leading them to "constructions" by way of our story, rather than using the story for the mere sake of the construction? It seems to me it would be more cheerful to greet one's class in Composition with: "This morning we will translate the story of Iphigeneia, or of Beowulf, or of King Arthur," as the jam concealing the pills, rather than with the horrid pill exposed to open view: "Our lesson to-day is on the *Uses of the Dative*, and the exercise following thereon (Sentence 1: "I could not doubt that falsehood was most inconsistent with

your brother's character")." When I was "training" to teach in England I was warned not to compel my students to devour declensions wholesale, but to introduce "cases" deftly wrapped in sentences from the time of the earliest meetings of the class; this, I think, should be followed by the practice customary in our schools, of giving stories of a simple nature for translation. After this stage it does seem inevitable that we should train our students to read Latin through the perusal of military tactics: they must read the real thing. But is it necessary to treat them to this diet, varied with expostulations against Catiline, as their regular menu in Composition? I remember an undergraduate who was examined in my department here some three years ago for advanced standing; and her difficulty with the "vocabulary" of "*Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*." Why? There were oil-jars and robbers and slaves and public baths in Roman days. To set passages for translation into Latin which are evidently not edited or "selected" for this purpose, and not only to turn them into Latin words, but to imbue them with a Latin flavor, a very different thing, as we all know, is excellent for the guidance of our students and the proving that such things even in the twentieth century can be done. It certainly demands no small toil on the part of the teacher. But that is his business.

As to actual practice in modern teaching of "Prose" in school work I can only theorize; and indeed reform has already been instituted here. It is rather with the more advanced work that I am concerned at present. In this College where I am teaching we uphold Composition stoutly for those who wish to be specialists; we are trying to lead them on from "Elementary Prose" to "Intermediate" and "Advanced" work; that is, we offer three years' instruction, given in one meeting a week, and consider this proper training for our future teachers of Latin in schools. And here, I think, we do manage to be somewhat up-to-date. Our neophytes this year have been endeavoring to translate from *In Occupied Belgium*, from the *Water Babies* and *Robinson Crusoe*, our intermediaries from the *Pilgrim's Progress*, the *New York Times*, from Dickens and Agnes Repplier; our advanced students from the *Atlantic Monthly*, from "*If Winter Comes*," from Edith

Wharton or Calvin Coolidge. A catholic collection! If the teacher chooses wisely and is himself well read in the Latin classics, as his students should be under process of becoming, I do not see much danger of any "fancy Latin" undermining our instruction.

So much for the specialist. There is another question which was lately thrown as a challenge to me; what of those College students who do not mean to dive deeply into Latin? A certain knowledge of "Prose" has been exacted from them at the College portals; is there any fruit for these people in elementary College work? I hope I am not inexcusably partial; but I do believe we have whereof even they may receive with profit. And these are my reasons.

This fall I met a class of seventeen, drawn from different College years, prepared to study Elementary College "Prose." That means, they vaguely expected to continue to "base" their writings, if not on the manoeuvres of Caesar and the fulminations of Cicero, then perhaps on battles of Livy, and exhortations on Friendship. These a priori conclusions received a jolt when they were bidden: "Take your pens and write in Latin these three sentences":

1. I have lately taken a course in First Aid.
2. I am majoring in English.
3. The Freshman Frolic was held three days ago.

Consternation. The productions showed, of course, that the majority did not know how to get at the root of a sentence, to divest an idea of its idiomatic dress and probe it to the heart. Instead of telling me in simple Latin words that they had been learning to take care of wounded or sick folk till the doctor could arrive, or that newly enrolled students had been making merry with their older companions, Americo-Latin barbarisms met me, as I knew they would. A "Freshman" was a "novus homo": the implication is scarcely flattering; a course in English was a *cursus Britannicus*. This does not by any means imply that these students knew little Latin or could not translate from Latin into English; they simply thought of "composition in Latin" as an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. We try, therefore, to teach our Latin Prosaics to grasp the naked meaning of their English; and this

lesson, I submit, can be taught far more thoroughly in Latin than in modern language classes. Many English metaphors may be transposed bodily into another modern tongue, or replaced by a corresponding figure of speech. But the Latin language, as ancient, largely excludes modern metaphor, and as the property of a people intensely matter-of-fact, is not partial to metaphorical expression at all. It is this characteristic, the desire for concrete expression, which made the Latin writers—other than the philosophers—delight in verbs rather than in nouns. Nouns may be used to cover a multitude of vague ideas. What, for instance, do we really say in English when we relate: "A string of circumstantial evidence pointed in the same direction"; or "Though for me . . . no hospitable roof threw open its doors"? There is, of course, a very real and large place for metaphors in English; but many—I am speaking of prose, not poetry—would be the better for a little pruning. He therefore who endeavors to write in Latin of necessity learns to express himself succinctly: the temptation to write words, mere words, falls away, and a virile composition, instinct with meaning in its every part, is the result of a successful "prose."

Secondly, we agree, most of us, that it is desirable that we of modern days should study the life and character of the Roman people. As then he gains less insight into this who only looks at it through the necessarily distorting spectacles of translation, so he must gain more who studies intelligently the Roman *verba ipsissima*, and ways of combining these. It is a common-place that a nation's character, as a man's, is revealed in its language and its use thereof. Now the student who translates from Latin in class is absorbed in English; his mind is occupied in thinking out the English he is to offer, and he heeds the Latin only so far as he is obliged. The deeper his anxiety to translate well, the harder his study of English vocabulary. The student who has to write Latin must try to wrest his mind to a Latin angle; and hence he learns something of the spirit of the people whose words are on his pen. How much does an Anglo-Saxon who cannot write a tolerably decent letter in French or Spanish really understand of the character of the French or Spanish nation? And so, when a

Latinist translates from the story of Scrooge or Robinson Crusoe, he must not only put together Latin words for English ones, but endeavor to soak his story in a Latin atmosphere; he must replace English-born metaphors and picture-words by those of Roman life. There lies, I suppose, and must lie, the difference between "Latin Prose" as it may be taught in school and in college. The College teacher tries to make of it something artistic; his students appreciate the higher stage.

For, thirdly, we, as artists, try to build up our Prose. Just as in playing golf, the anxiety lies greatly in the choice of club for each drive, or approach or putt, so in writing Latin, the scholar must consider which of his collection of "constructions" he shall employ to build up his narrative in "period" or short sentence. Hardly any language, I imagine, shows the same degree of psychological development of thought as Latin in its carefully constructed sentences. While the story develops from point to point clause after clause gradually reveals it to the reader, till finally with the "main verb" there breaks upon his understanding the climax of each stage of its progress. His interest therefore is kept suspended throughout. Quick action, on the other hand, is pictured by the short abrupt sentence, by historic infinitives, by asyndeton. There is no possibility, naturally, of reproducing all this artificial composition in our modern prose; but the principle underlying it might well be borne in mind even in details of English writings. Latin Prose, moreover, has the power of heightening the value of its words by their mere position in the sentence; the Latinist considers how he may place his significant words in the best light. Juxtaposition of picture-words enhances the effect of each; cacophony is avoided at all costs, for the Romans were notoriously sensitive to the sound of words; a rhythm runs through the prose, but rhyme and all semblance of verse effect are carefully eschewed. Cannot the disciple of English Prose find help in studying these rigid laws of expression?

Lastly, the writer of Latin is forced to study in a special way the meaning of the words he uses. So does the translator; but with scarcely the same degree of meditation! The process is both easy and difficult. For in Latin the meaning of every word is

fixed, and does not vary in varying quarters as that of modern words often does. But this crystallized meaning shows stages of progress in its life-history; and I triumph over my student who only reads half the paragraph allotted to each word even in the woefully imperfect dictionaries! And the force of modern derivatives from Latin differs notoriously from that of their originals; we who read Latin all know that nothing can be taken for granted on the score of similarity of form. And then, words of special zest must be dropped into one's Latin concoction to give spice to the whole; an occasional *scilicet* or *videlicet* or *quid?* or *quidem*. What would Demosthenes be without his "O Earth and Gods!"

If, then, Latin Prose be taught in College (based *scilicet* on knowledge gained by elementary work at school) as an artistic production, to be developed according to the artistic powers and the individual predilections of each artist in words, may we not think we have something to offer to the student of Liberal Arts though he never means to be a Latin classicist?